

**Response to Samuel Wheeler:
“Naturalist Structuralism’s Aporia?
Essentialism, Indeterminacy, and Nostalgia”**

Paul Livingston
University of New Mexico

Samuel Wheeler has insightfully and helpfully responded to my essay, “The Breath of Sense: Language, Structure, and the Paradox of Origin,” which was itself a partial summary and development of interpretative views about the history of twentieth century philosophy articulated in my recent book *Philosophy and the Vision of Language* (Routledge, 2008). In the following, I respond briefly to Wheeler’s commentary, tracing areas of convergence and remaining disagreements. Specifically, Wheeler’s response focuses in detail on the implications of the aporia implicit in Quine’s “indeterminacy of radical translation” thesis, including the development of these implications in the work of Donald Davidson. On my view, this aporia, in its general form, has deep and important implications for our understanding of our everyday, lived relationship to the language that we speak. Wheeler agrees about the existence and philosophical significance of translational indeterminacy as stated by Quine, but seeks, largely through his sympathetic exposition of Davidson’s position, to limit the implications of Quine’s result and related aporias for our everyday experience of language. My main disagreement with Wheeler is that I do not think these implications can be thus limited. Davidson’s mature views about language and interpretation do indeed represent a reasonable systematic development and extension of Quine’s aporia, but they also, as I shall briefly argue, mean giving up on the structuralist project of providing a description *in neutral terms* of a language by displaying its underlying and constitutive structure of rules of use. But if such a neutral description is impossible, as both Quine’s and Davidson’s views tend to suggest, then our everyday, lived relationship to language is very different than that which both ordinary discourse and “traditional” philosophy have presupposed, and the problem that Heidegger discusses as that of the “being of language” indeed unavoidably rears its (ugly or promising?) head.

The question of how we relate to our own (ordinary) language also clearly bears important implications for the legacy of the analytic tradition, which has centrally and decisively made the meaning of ordinary language a main topic of philosophical investigation. In sketching the motivations for Quine’s internal critique of Carnap’s conventionalism, Wheeler suggests

that it was Quine's rejection of a residual essentialism about meanings that led Quine to his own empiricism. In *Word and Object*, Quine replaces "meanings" as traditionally conceived with the much more limited notion of "stimulus meanings," tractable in terms of the route from sensory stimulus to behavioral response.¹ Quine's rejection of the residual essentialism still present in Carnap's attempt to draw an analytic/synthetic distinction is indeed a leading example of the strongly anti-metaphysical bearing of much analytic philosophy of language. But to claim that empiricism about meaning is obligatory once essentialism is rejected is, I think, to give us (at least) one alternative too few. For the most significant results of the analytic tradition, Quine's included, can also be interpreted as yielding a set of *critical* approaches to language that are neither essentialist nor empiricist, but rather continue the Kantian critique of metaphysics by collectively suggesting an ever-renewed reflection on the role of language in propounding and consolidating determinative pictures of human life. Here, the important question is not so much what meanings "actually are," as how our conceptions of language and linguistic meaning drive broader assumptions about intersubjective *praxis* and shared social life. In my essay, I documented several instances at which leading results of the analytic tradition (including Quine's) have played a role in demystifying the traditional picture of language that opposes immaterial meaning to material signs as soul is opposed to body. These pictures of language and life play, I think, an important role in organizing conceptions of human practice and social life. But their demystification does not depend on adopting an empiricist view of what meanings are, but rather on continuing to pose the critical question of the limits of language as we encounter those limits in the varied circumstances of our lives.

On the first page of his response, Professor Wheeler raises four challenges to what he takes to be the overall interpretive position I took in the essay. First, he questions "whether Quine's argument [for indeterminacy] is in fact a consequence of naturalism and structuralism." Second, he challenges the claim that "contemporary naturalism is committed to ... Quine's thesis." Third, he questions "whether analytic philosophy has abandoned its previous insistence on the centrality of language to philosophy because of Quine's aporia." Finally, he suggests that the aporia might helpfully be taken as a "discovery" rather than simply as a "paradox." In the following, I respond to these challenges in reverse order.

Taking the last point first, I am happy to agree that Quine's result, like several of the major results of the analytic tradition (e.g. Russell's paradox and Gödel's incompleteness

theorem), is at least as much a contribution to our understanding of its subject matter as it represents a problem for this understanding. Just as Russell's paradox shows us something about the nature of sets by frustrating a natural, intuitive preconception about which sets can exist, so Quine's result certainly contributes, even if only in a "negative" way, to our understanding of what we pre-theoretically term "language." More generally, as I argue in detail in *Philosophy and the Vision of Language*, many of the main results of the analytic tradition tend to demonstrate the inherently paradoxical implications of what would otherwise appear to be natural and intuitive assumptions about the nature and existence of language as a whole, for instance the assumptions that language is constituted by rules of use governing the intercombination and application of signs and that these rules are, in principle, intelligible as a whole to theoretical analysis or reflection. All of these results (including Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations and Sellars' "pure pragmatism" about meaning) do indeed bear first and foremost against the *theoretician's* specialized attempt to grasp language by elucidating its underlying structural principles. But as I argue in more detail in the book, in so doing they cannot help but raise the question of what we (pre-theoretically) can mean in invoking language or its nature, as we do on manifold occasions of ordinary life. If a language, as Quine's aporia tends to suggest, cannot be specified in neutral terms as a set of constitutive rules, then it becomes deeply mysterious what it is to learn one or speak one, or what kind of knowledge we ascribe to someone who is able to do either.

With the third of Wheeler's points above, I also agree wholeheartedly. As a matter of conceptual genealogy and sociology, the widespread abandonment of language as a foundational topic of investigation in the work of (self-identified) analytic philosophers over the last twenty or thirty years is not a direct consequence of Quine's result, but owes much more, as Wheeler helpfully points out, to the prominence of essentialist arguments derived from Kripke's arguments in *Naming and Necessity* and related texts. I concur with Wheeler, as well, in regretting the return of essentialist metaphysics and share his view that this return is not sufficiently motivated by the arguments that have been given. In the paper, I meant to suggest, not that Quine's result has or should have led philosophers to give up on the characteristic analytic investigation of language, but only that the result bears deeply on what we *should* take to be the large-scale legacy of this investigation as it has been conducted over the course of the twentieth century. Again, I wholly share Wheeler's evident sense that it would be beneficial for

practitioners of analytic philosophy to return to the central and determinative concern with language that was the original inspiration of the tradition and the source of *all* of its most distinctive problems and results, including the very results that motivated the “return to metaphysics” in the 1970s and 80s. These problems have by no means subsequently been resolved by positive theory or discoveries, and can indeed, as I argue in my book, be the site of important contributions to critical thinking about intersubjectivity and politics, among other open philosophical topics.

With respect to the question of the historical provenance of contemporary naturalism (Wheeler’s second challenge), I think it is important to distinguish Quine’s internal critique of structuralism from his surrounding commitments to the naturalism which tended to determine his way of presenting the results of the critique. On my telling, the aporia Quine discovered with respect to translation is essentially a result of the inherent instability of the structuralist picture of language, which holds that language as a whole is a structure of rules. The aporia itself does not depend centrally on naturalism or a naturalistic (for instance, a behaviorist) account of the facts available to the translator. Indeed, very similar critical results have been demonstrated by philosophers who were not in any sense committed to a natural-scientific description of the actual basis of language use; witness, for instance, Wittgenstein’s diagnosis of the central “paradox” of rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*.² As I argued in the paper, Quine’s presentation of naturalism in the restricted context of epistemology was mainly a late and largely negative gloss on what he took to be the upshot of the radical translation result. If it is indeed impossible to achieve translational determinacy, then the “foundationalist” (actually, positivist or phenomenalist) project of attempting to ground empirical knowledge on a neutral basis of immediately given experience must be abandoned, and a naturalistic ersatz for epistemology must be (Quine supposed) all that remains possible. His naturalistic commitments were therefore the context in which Quine elaborated and expounded his views about language, meaning, and foundationalism, but they were by no means an essential component of these views themselves. Unfortunately, however, it is these naturalist background commitments, rather than Quine’s most central results about language and meaning, that have survived and become dominant within recent analytic philosophy, meanwhile attaining a much more positive and programmatic character than they had for Quine himself.

This brings me to the first point Wheeler mentions, and the only one on which I think there is genuine and deep disagreement between us. This is the suggestion that Quine's argument for indeterminacy is not in fact inevitable given his structuralist and empiricist starting points (or at least something like them), and accordingly that the indeterminacy result, or what it tends to suggest, need not deeply trouble either the prospects for a structuralist picture of language or our ordinary access to the language that we speak. Wheeler makes this case largely through his sympathetic exposition of Davidson's views about meaning and interpretation, which indeed share the structuralist motivations of Quine's thesis but do not draw the same paradoxical and aporetic conclusions. From the first of his published writings on language, Davidson sought to modify the Quinean result into a more general and comprehensive theory of "radical interpretation." Davidson held that we can specify a recursive "theory of interpretation" or "theory of meaning" for a natural language by specifying rules that systematically specify the truth-conditions for the language's sentences in accordance with Tarski's "convention T."³ Thus, an axiomatized "theory of interpretation" for a natural language has as its consequences truth-conditional specifications of the form: "Grass is green" is true if and only if grass is green. And the task of a theory of interpretation is to provide a finite corpus of principles capable of generating all such T-sentences.

As Wheeler points out, Davidson's shift from focusing on radical translation to focusing on radical interpretation significantly limits the scope of translational indeterminacy. For Quine, "charity principles" ungrounded in the facts themselves are, at best, useful in bridging the gap between these facts and a systematic translation; for Davidson, by contrast, charity principles are unavoidable and implicitly operative in *any* understanding of a meaningful utterance as such. Because of this, Davidson eschews any account of interpretation as beginning with "raw facts" or data of either a behavioral or physiological kind; interpretation is always already at work, and there is no hope of reconstructing the basis of meaning from a supposedly neutral set of uninterpreted facts or data about speech behavior. Additionally, since interpretation and charity are always already at work even in the understanding of the most ordinary utterances, there is no longer any way to characterize a language or the "conceptual scheme" it embodies as matching, fitting, or capturing any pre-given data (either of a physical or phenomenal kind). With this, as Davidson argued in the notorious "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," the very possibility of distinguishing between various conceptual schemes in terms of the ways

they fit or match pre-given content also lapses, and the possibility of a “scheme-content” distinction is repudiated as the third (and final) “dogma of empiricism.”⁴ It thus emerges as something like a transcendental condition on the possibility of understanding *any* set of behaviors as meaningful utterances that they cannot be seen as embodying a conceptual scheme radically at odds with my own; for us to be communicating at all, it is necessary that we agree, at least in a large-scale way, about truth and meaning. Because of this, as Wheeler suggests, any indeterminacy or ambiguity that actually arises in the course of interpretation, either across languages or within a single one, will be relatively local, limited, and fairly easily resolved. Disagreements may arise about which of the various senses of an ambiguous term is intended, but this kind of disagreement will evidently no longer deeply threaten our pre-existing intuitions about the (relative) fixity and determinacy of meaning.

As Wheeler points out as well, Davidson’s theory is “structuralist” in at least some of the senses of that term; although Davidson ultimately abandoned the conventionalist picture of languages as communally shared patterns of behavior, he continued to hold that an individual speaker’s idiolect, at any moment, could at least in principle be fully specified by a recursive interpretation theory, and the statement of such a theory would specify the rules actually determinative of the speaker’s usage at that time. Does the example of Davidson, then, show that structuralist theories of language need not lead to the general aporia about our knowledge of language that underlies Quine’s indeterminacy result? *Pace* Wheeler, I think that it does not in fact show this. For although Davidson’s theory is “structuralist” in important respects, and although it gives us reason to believe that the extent of actual indeterminacy will be limited *where common access to language can be presupposed*, there is nevertheless good reason to doubt that it can resolve the general aporia about the basis of our access to language itself to which Quine’s theory also points. It is true that a Davidsonian interpretation theory, as opposed to a Quinean translation manual, avoids the problem of the relationship between the uninterpreted “facts” of linguistic usage or physiology and an interpreted language; in this way Davidson avoids recapitulating the indeterminacy result in its starkest form. But *for this very reason*, a Davidsonian interpretation theory necessarily stops short of giving an illuminating and *comprehensive* account of what is involved in knowing a language at all. In making interpretation a matter of intra-linguistic understanding rather than the Quinean problem of making sense of otherwise uninterpreted utterances, Davidson’s account fails to settle the more basic question

of what is involved in knowing the meaning of a language's terms at all.⁵ The underlying problem that vexes structuralism in all of its forms – the ultimate instability of its account of the existence and nature of language as a whole – remains, and continues to render what we understand intuitively as our “knowledge of language” deeply problematic.

We can see more clearly why Davidson's approach does not ultimately avoid the problem that troubles structuralism in all of its forms by considering in more detail the actual structure of a Davidsonian interpretation theory. As we have seen, the point of such a theory for a natural language is to give a recursively specifiable set of rules capable of determining the truth-conditions of each assertoric sentence of the language, in accordance with Tarski's convention T. Now, in what sense (if any) would such a theory, even if completely worked out, actually *capture* the knowledge that is embodied in the ability that a competent native speaker has to speak his or her first language? Clearly, it is important to Davidson that an interpretation theory does indeed embody (in some sense) the knowledge that a speaker possesses (in some sense) in virtue of possessing the ability to speak her language; indeed, Davidson at several places imposes restrictions on the form of an interpretation theory based on the requirement that a language be learnable in a finite amount of time and that our knowledge of it be empirically verifiable.⁶ But since the ability to speak a language (any language) is also the ability to competently use *many* concepts, the knowledge that is attributed to a speaker in attributing to her the capability to speak the language must necessarily include the knowledge underlying this ability. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that an interpretation theory's schematization of a language, as a systematic account of the dependence of sentential truth-conditions on the compositional intercombinations of more basic linguistic terms, also provides a schematization of the systematic interrelationships of at least the language's basic concepts.⁷ But while there is good reason to think that an interpretation theory can indeed thus provide a kind of schematization of a language's concepts, there is in fact little reason to think that knowledge of this schematization is itself capable of conferring a grasp of these basic concepts upon an interpreter *who does not already possess them*. In an influential article entitled “What is a Theory of Meaning?”, Michael Dummett distinguishes between two ways of understanding the overall form of a (Davidsonian) interpretation theory.⁸ Such a theory will be, in Dummett's terminology, “full-blooded” if explicit knowledge of the truths it contains is capable of conferring upon its knower a grasp of the basic concepts involved in those truths

(i.e., those involved in the statements of truth-conditions on the right-hand side of the Tarski-sentences). Otherwise – if the interpretation theory does *not* suffice to confer a grasp of the basic concepts it utilizes – Dummett terms it “modest.”

Although Dummett himself sought to defend a conception of Davidsonian interpretation theories as full-blooded, McDowell has argued convincingly (1983, 1997) that such theories must after all be construed as modest. There are various reasons for suspecting that this is so, but one of the most important that McDowell cites is that we have no way, in general, to understand a speaker’s linguistic behavior as manifesting her grasp of a familiar concept *unless* we count ourselves as entitled to the general assumption that she is using concepts roughly as we do. McDowell makes the point by considering the question of what is needed in order to attribute to someone the concept *square*:

Can implicit knowledge that that is how square things are to be treated be manifested in behavior, characterized ‘as from outside’ content? It may seem that nothing could be simpler: the manifestation would be someone’s treating a square thing in whatever way is in question. But any such performance would be an equally good manifestation of any of an indefinite number of different pieces of such implicit knowledge. (Consider implicit knowledge to the effect that that is the way to treat things that are either square or) If we assume a stable propensity, guided by an unchanging piece of implicit knowledge, we can use further behavior to rule out some of these competing candidates. But no finite set of performances would eliminate them all; and finite sets of performances are all we get.⁹

As McDowell’s presentation brings out, the problem here is essentially the same as the general “paradox” of rule-following described in Kripke’s (1982) now-classic exposition of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Given any finite number of performances (even if these are taken as manifesting the grasp of *some* linguistic concept, and so not as ‘mere behavior’ or behavioral facts), it nevertheless remains open to us to take that set as manifesting the grasp of *any* of an infinite number of concepts. The only way to prevent this indeterminacy from threatening is, then, simply to assume that the subject of interpretation already possesses the *same* concept we do (e.g., in this case, *our* concept *square*). But then what we attribute to

the subject in attributing to her knowledge (even implicit knowledge) of a Davidsonian interpretation theory for her own language is only intelligible against the background assumption that we do, indeed, share with her a large stock of concepts already. It follows that it is impossible for these theories *by themselves* to convey a grasp of the relevant concepts; Davidsonian theories must indeed be “modest” in Dummett’s sense.¹⁰

It is important to recognize just what this result does and does not imply about our ordinary knowledge of a language. It is true, as McDowell hastens to point out, that neither this problem nor Wittgenstein’s paradox implies that we do not or cannot “know what we mean” in using words in the ordinary ways that we do. *For as long as a shared background set of practices, or patterns of usage, can be assumed*, there is no problem with assuming that my interlocutor’s performances will continue to accord with what I expect, given my attribution to her of the concepts I do in fact attribute. As McDowell puts it, in discussing the closely related issue of the completion of a numerical series:

We should not take the Wittgensteinian point ... to reveal an unexpected fragility in our claims to understand one another. In real life, at least in some cases, it can be much better than a mere hypothesis for me that someone is not engaged in a pattern that goes on “..., 1000, 1004, 1008, ...”. I can know that she will not go on like that – barring mental aberration, a prank, or whatever. But that is because in such cases I know that what she is doing warrants a description at the level of ‘obeying the instruction to add 2’. I have the knowledge I do of the pattern to which the behavior conforms ... as described in terms that function below the level of that description, only derivatively from my knowledge that that description applies. If I suspend that knowledge, as I must if I am required to refrain from using the concepts that figure in it, the pattern takes on, as before, the aspect of a hypothesis...¹¹

That is, nothing about the necessity of modesty in interpretation theories or about Wittgenstein’s paradox itself tends to threaten our ability to attribute knowledge of meanings to our interlocutors, *if common possession of a shared background of practice, and the knowledge of concepts embodied in it, can be presupposed*. Moreover, as McDowell’s example brings out, such a shared background *is*, in general, presupposed whenever we interpret another’s behavior as

linguistic behavior at all. Indeed, one way of taking the point of Davidson's employment of charity principles as preconditions for the possibility of interpretation is precisely that we *must* assume some such shared background in order to interpret at all. Nevertheless, it is one thing to say that we do in fact make this kind of assumption, or even that we *must* make it in order for interpretation to be possible; but it is quite another to claim that this necessity makes the assumption innocent, on the level of our understanding of the nature of language itself. If a common background of concepts and practices indeed *must* be assumed in this way for interpretation to be possible, there is no hope that a Davidsonian interpretation theory will provide any useful general account of what it is to possess concepts or to speak a language at all.

What is the nature, and what the grounding, of the "agreement" between us that must be assumed in order for us to be intelligible to one another? In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein specifies this agreement in response to an interlocutor who sketches a "conventionalist" view of truth and falsity as determined by what we (can) agree upon:

241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.

That is, the mutual agreement or "attunement"¹² that is necessary if we are to be able to communicate at all is not so much a matter of agreement on matters of fact or opinion (although, as Davidson argues, widespread agreement about what is true may also be necessary), as it is agreement on (or attunement in) the whole immense and scarcely describable variety of ways of relating, behaving, interacting and doing things collectively that Wittgenstein terms a "form of life." The extent of this agreement is vast, but it does have its limits; and where it breaks down, there is, in general, nothing that a theory of meaning or interpretation (or, indeed, *any* theory of language) can do to help. Wittgenstein's response to the interlocutory voice, here, reflects the ultimate inability of *any* theory of language (whether of a structuralist or any other kind) to assure the basis of agreement that must obtain, if we are to be able to understand each other at all. But at this point, the problem of what is involved in our everyday shared access to the language that we speak becomes one that cannot be resolved by any theory that would seek to guarantee the ground of this access, but must rather

be lived recurrently in our everyday experience of our relation to (what we take to be) the language we speak.

Whatever their merits, then, I conclude that Davidsonian interpretation theories cannot provide any real solution to the problem to which structuralist theories originally attempted to respond, namely that of giving an account of what we know when we can speak a language and what is involved in our everyday access to it. If we are gripped with the question of how it is possible for any word or symbol to mean anything, or how it is possible for us to have access to (a) language at all, or what precisely one needs to know in order to know and be able to speak one, Davidsonian interpretation theories will not help.

Now, it might be thought that, given the extent to which ordinary interlocution can admittedly proceed untroubled (at least in normal cases) despite Quine's and Davidson's results, these questions need not really grip us; perhaps, as Wheeler comes close to suggesting toward the end of his response, these questions themselves ought rather to be dismissed as grounded in a kind of illusion. Certainly, as Wheeler suggests, the results of Davidson, Quine, and Wittgenstein speak with one voice in demonstrating that the questions: "how do I know the meaning of a word?" and "what assures that another means the same things by her words as I do by my same-sounding ones?" are not to be answered by recourse to introspective data, psychological facts, states of consciousness, or anything else "internal" in the phenomenological sense. Even more stringently, as I have argued in my book and (much more briefly) above, the common form of the aporetic results of all three philosophers seems to demand, as well, that these questions cannot readily be answered with "external" data (whether of a behaviorist, physiological, or sociological kind) either.

Yet even if the aporias demonstrated by the course of twentieth-century analytic philosophy are able to show that the provision of new data of whatever kind will not suffice to answer the question of the nature of our relationship to the language we speak, it does not follow that this question is itself illusory or badly posed. Indeed, it seems to me that this question remains as significant as ever, if only because our conceptions of the dimensions of significance of a human life – what projects to undertake, how to think about our aspirations and capabilities, how to understand our involvement in common projects or the social forms that mediate them – continue to depend in detail on the ways that we conceive and envision the form of our relation to the language that we speak. In other words, the activity of

envisioning language is of a piece with our activity of conceiving of the means, ends, and forms of a human life, and this entwinement alone is sufficient to show that the theoretical results that demonstrate that a straightforward answer to the problem of language is not forthcoming should not lead us to abandon the problem itself. More specifically, as I argue in more detail in my book, the structuralist picture of language, despite its theoretical failings, has repeatedly proved decisive in the motivating characteristic patterns of thought and modes of collective action in the twentieth century, and these patterns of thought and action have themselves played a determinative role in politics, culture, and the organization of social life. If this is right, then the internal theoretical critique that the structuralist picture undergoes at the hands of Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson and (in a different way) Heidegger, can scarcely fail to have deep and potentially transformative implications for the ways that we think the possible forms of our mutuality and the pursuit of a common linguistic life.

What is to be done with a problem which, as frustrating and intractable to theoretical solution as this one seems to be, nevertheless seems recurrently and unavoidably to arise almost as soon as critical reflection on the forms of our lives begins? The closest parallel I know is the situation of reason itself, as described by Kant in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.¹³

According to Kant, reason's own imperative to seek unity in the world drives it to pose questions, for instance about the beginning of the world in time and its ultimate material composition, that *cannot* be answered by any positive theory, but at the same time cannot be avoided as long as we employ reason at all. The objects of the "ideas of reason" (God, World, and Soul) are indeed illusory; but the illusion is unavoidable as long as we seek to understand the sources of our being, the totality of its horizon, and its most inward nature. Moreover, the repeated frustration of theoretical reason in attempting to provide objects for its own problematic concepts is, from another perspective, simply the necessary opening of *practical* reason in its further pursuit of the solution of the problems of action; for once we eschew any *theoretical* employment of the ideas of reason, they nevertheless retain a "regulative" role in the

reflective determination of courses of action and the motivations of the will. If, then, language-as-a-whole is indeed, and for similar reasons, to be understood as a Transcendental Illusion, then the Quinean, Wittgensteinian, or Davidsonian diagnosis of the error nevertheless leaves the illusion in place on the level of ordinary reflection; and if we cannot seek to avoid it as long as we employ linguistic reason (that is, as long as we reflect on the forms of our speech), a critical response to its inherent dialectic can nevertheless provide the key to a renewal of the problem on the *practical* level of our lived relationships with one another.

Speaking more genealogically, it seems to me that the aporetic results of the 1950s and 1960s faced the analytic tradition with a relatively stark and determinative choice of methodological courses. Given the variety of results that tended to show the untenability of the structuralist conception of language (on which the whole notion of linguistic “analysis” had been based) and hence tended to suggest that a straightforward theoretical answer to the question “what is language as a whole?” would not be forthcoming, one evident option was to give up on the question itself. This is in fact the course that subsequent practitioners of the tradition largely took, repudiating the “linguistic turn” itself and finding external reasons to think that the question of language must be badly posed or *in itself* illusory, despite the massively evident dependence of earlier analytic philosophy on proposed answers to it, and despite the manifold ways it arises routinely in the course of daily life. (It is, as well, this decision to abandon the problem of language in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, that led most directly to the contemporary dominance of both naturalism in epistemology and essentialism in metaphysics.) However, given the failure of structuralist answers to the problem of language on the level of *theory*, an alternative resolution – one that was not in fact taken, but could have been, – would have been to take up the problem anew on the level of *critique*. Had philosophers, rather than abandoning the problem, taken it up in this way, they might have been led to a far-ranging reflection on the practical significance of the problem of our relation to language, as we experience this relation in the forms of our lives; and as I have argued in my book, this reflection could at several points make very close contact with aspects of the twentieth-century “continental” tradition as it has similarly taken up the critical, social, and political implications of our relationship to the language that we speak. In this way, the analytic tradition’s investigation of language could indeed have led to a renewed and enhanced opening of what Heidegger calls the question of the being of language.¹⁴ Moreover, it could have brought to this critical

reflection the full resources of the analytic tradition's truth-conditional and logically based theories of language, which improve upon anything available in the continental tradition in many respects. It is indeed regrettable that, leaving aside a few figures (the most prominent of these is Stanley Cavell), the analytic tradition has largely chosen the first rather than the second way of responding to the failure of structuralist theories to respond to the problem of language; it is to be hoped that a historically based retrieval of this problem, grounded in an understanding of the original problems and motivations that inaugurated the analytic tradition to begin with and their similarities to those motivating the parallel "continental" streams of philosophical thought, can today lead to a resumption and intensification of the significant critical and sociopolitical potential of the analytic movement itself.

Notes

¹ Quine (1960)

² See, e.g., *PI* sections 81, 201, and 217 among others.

³ Davidson (1965), (1970), (1973a), and (1973b).

⁴ Davidson (1974).

⁵ In saying that Davidson presupposes an “intra-linguistic” view of interpretation, I do not mean to deny that his framework can help us make sense of translation between two *different* languages. I just mean that it does not help us to understand how we can enter into a linguistically shaped understanding of the world from a position innocent of that understanding.

⁶ See, e.g., Davidson 1965 and 1973b.

⁷ That is, attribution of knowledge of a language, if this knowledge is captured in a Davidsonian interpretation theory, must also involve attributing the capacity to use, at least, those basic concepts that are picked out by whatever elementary terms are specified in the specifications of the underlying recursive rules.

⁸ Dummett (1975).

⁹ McDowell 1983, p. 96.

¹⁰ In my book and in greater detail in my essay, I take McDowell to task for assuming, in *Mind and World*, that language can be treated as a “repository of tradition” and a “store of reasons” without a more specific account of what is involved in knowing or learning a language than McDowell himself is prepared to give. Nevertheless, I think that McDowell is quite right to argue, in the two essays in which he addresses the issue of modesty, that a Davidsonian interpretation theory cannot itself provide an account of how language embodies concepts and reasons in this sense.

¹¹ McDowell 1997, pp. 116-17.

¹² The term “attunement” is Stanley Cavell’s. I am indebted here to his analyses in Cavell (1969) and, especially, (1979).

¹³ Kant (1789), A vii.

¹⁴ This problem is, as I understand it, quite easy and straightforward to state. It is the question: “what kind of thing is language?” asked without prejudice to the claim that it must indeed be a *thing* (that is, something that sustains unproblematic objective reference like a tree or a building). Simply formulating this question – which is what I take to be Heidegger’s primary goal in his discussions of language, beginning at least with *Being and Time* (e.g. section 34) – does not seem to me at all to involve “nostalgia” or the search for some chimerical relationship between language and “Being.” In the sense in which it is relevant to Heidegger’s reflection on language, the question of being is just the question of the ground and nature of the existence of language (if it exists at all) and its relation to us. In that sense, I am further puzzled as to how “Being” could be (as Wheeler seems to suggest) anything like a “posit.”

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